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 TITLE "Western Essayist Literacy"--A Way of Teaching.
 PUB DATE Mar 92
 NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Classroom Research; *Discourse Modes; *Essays; Higher Education; Social Differences; Teaching Methods; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
 IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; Basic Writers; Composition Theory

ABSTRACT

College students, when writing essays in writing courses, are generally called upon to show that they have an ability to organize the essay according to an established pattern which includes an introduction, the body of the text, and a conclusion. This pattern of discourse, called "Essayist Literacy," is most favored by mainstream society. However, enlisting students to learn and use the language of mainstream academia is obviously not all there is to learning how to write well. Writing instructors must look beyond what they teach to how they teach it. To examine how writing teachers teach and the effects of that teaching on students, a study was conducted by observing one basic writing course for an entire semester, audiotaping all class sessions, and taping conversations with the students and instructor as well as conferences. The discourse patterns of the essayist literacy style dominated the class both in written and oral communication. This discourse pattern is not limited to composition courses, but pervades the college and virtually all social groups. Composition textbooks and handbooks also strongly hold to these patterns. Writing instructors must look at this model of discourse carefully in terms of its implications for the classroom. Clearly, the farther a student's culture is from the mainstream culture, the more problems that student will have when it comes to doing well in schools based on the essayist literacy pattern. (Eighteen references are attached.) (HB)

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CCCC Presentation
3/30/91

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"Western Essayist Literacy" A Way of Teaching

Because writing is a key component to completing college in many colleges and universities, writing courses are used as a way of making sure that entering freshman can write at a certain level. However, not only must students demonstrate a level of competence in writing to enter the course, they must also display a certain level of expertise to exit. Students, when writing essays, must show that they have control of their writing skills by demonstrating that they have control of the grammatical and stylistic conventions, as well as an ability to organize the essay according to established patterns: an introduction with a thesis statement that clearly states the argument and purpose of the paper; the body of the text which contains paragraphs supporting the stated purpose; finally, a conclusion in which the purpose of the paper is restated. This is why Peter Elbow states in his most recent article in College English that "there is a grain of truth in the old perverse chestnut of advice: 'First say what you're going to say, then say it, then say what you've already said.'" This pattern of discourse is termed "Essayist Literacy" by scholars such as Scollon and Scollon and Shirley Brice Heath, and it is a discourse pattern favored by mainstream society.

To make sure that the students are writing at the level they are supposed to when they enter and exit composition courses, we

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test them on their writing skills, and we judge them by looking at how well they avoid errors, and how well they follow the conventions prescribed for them by the academic institutions as Mina Shaughnessy (1977); Mike Rose (1988); David Bartholomae (1988); Patrick Hartwell (1985) and many others point out. But also we judge the students on how well they use the language of academia, because, as Bartholomae points out in "Inventing the University," the student must learn to use and speak our language because this is what people notice first.

But is this all there is to learning how to write, memorizing the rules of academic discourse? Obviously the answer is no. For if this were the case, then we wouldn't have, as Pat Bizzell (1986) discusses, discrepancies in helping students to successfully complete composition courses. She points out that while some students are familiar and comfortable with academic discourse and excel in writing courses, others are not so familiar with this writing style and are even resistant to learning it. Furthermore, Michael Stubbs in Language and Literacy: The Sociolinguistics of Reading and Writing suggests that when it comes to teaching writing, the problem with many of us is that we do not take into consideration what we teach. We do not seem to understand that by teaching students to write in standard English, we are teaching them more than just Standard English grammar. We are teaching a discourse pattern that is culturally specific to academic and mainstream societies; we are teaching them essayist literacy (Farr (1992); Scollon and Scollon

(1981). It is important, then, for students to understand this pattern of discourse to succeed socially and economically.

Although I am concerned about what we teach, my focus is more on how we teach, because all the studies I have looked at so far focus on the many aspects of what we teach, but none look at how, how we get students to write in the manner they are supposed to. In order for us to look at how we teach, we have to observe writing classrooms in progress in their own environments to understand all the underlying factors that contribute to the class.

This is what I am interested in my own study, looking at how we teach and its affects on the students. To begin such a study, this past fall, I sat in and observed one basic writing course for an entire semester (sixteen weeks) and audiotape all the class sessions. I also taped my conversations with the students and the instructor as well as student/teacher conferences. After reviewing my notes and tapes, my preliminary analysis seems to support the idea that we teach students how to write by stressing, unconsciously, the conventions outlined in text books I will discuss later, but also we do much more. We model this style discourse pattern intuitively in our written communications to the student as well as in our oral discourse. Let me explain what I mean by briefly telling you about my findings, starting with the more global aspects of the class.

The instructor began the semester with a syllabus outlining the entire term. In it she stated her purpose: "to prepare the

students for the required composition course by showing them how to write persuasively." She followed her stated purpose with a general outline of how she was going to go about doing this, which could be broken into three parts. She began the semester working on sentence and paragraph skills, and pre-writing techniques. She, besides requiring students to buy a handbook, further passed out handouts on prepositions, appositives, and transitional words. Then she moved into the writing of descriptive/narrative essays. Her first topic asked the students to concentrate on themselves by describing who they were. For the second written assignment, though it dealt with descriptive and narrative structure, there was a shift toward exploration. The paper centered on where the students came from. For the final topic the instructor concentrated on the persuasive paper. She asked her students to look at and analyze an advertisement and study the techniques used. During the final days of the term, the instructor went over, with the class, what they had accomplished over course of the semester.

As I moved away from the global aspects and into individual class sessions, I noticed that each class session could also be broken into this beginning, middle, and end pattern. At the beginning of each class session, the instructor outlined, either verbally or written on the chalkboard, what she wanted to accomplish for that particular day, many times referring to her syllabus to confirm that she was on schedule. Then she followed through with what she had stated. And at the end of many of the

class sessions, the instructor usually summarized what was covered during class. She would usually end the session with a brief reminder to the students to look at the syllabus before the next class session began.

This discourse pattern is not unique or limited to college composition courses as Heath (1978, 1983) shows. Even before the mainstream child learns to speak, that child is already learning this style of literacy by watching family members interact. As the child begins to speak, he or she then learns by interacting with family members as well. But all through its young life, the mainstream child is showered with events that promote this style of literacy, such as story telling strategies, reading (being read to), and games. This style of literacy is further reinforced as the child enters school and is taught to read and write according to this discourse pattern as Scollon and Scollon, (1981), Heath (1983) and Wertsch (1985) demonstrate in their studies. So by the time the main stream students enter college, they have gone through a number of school activities that have strengthened the idea of essayist literacy. And of course they have gone through a number of English text books, writing books, and handbooks that further model this particular discourse style (Heath 1981, 1982, 1983; Philips 1972).

And since writing textbooks and handbooks are commonly required in many composition classrooms, it is also important that we look at them as well, because as teachers of writing, many of us use text books and handbooks to reinforce and

supplement our own teaching methods. What I found is very interesting, especially when I compared these textbooks to the how we teach. For the most part, the text books are organized in such a way to help the instructor teach in this particular pattern mentioned earlier, this idea of stating the purpose early, supporting the stated purpose in the body of the text, and restating the purpose at the end of the text. Most of these texts books can be broken into three sections. The first section is usually on the sentence and sentence parts (parts of speech): noun, verbs, object, etc, because by understanding the parts of the sentence, the students can understand how sentences fit together and thereby avoid basic sentence errors. Then the next section is usually on paragraph construction so that the students can work on organizational skills as well as understanding how sentences fit together. Here the handbooks usually address the topic sentence first, followed by sentences supporting the topic sentence, followed by a transitional sentence that restates the topic sentence and prepares the reader for the next paragraph. Once the students have exhibited that they are capable of writing such paragraphs, they are ready to move on to the next section of the text, which is the writing of complete essays. Most of these text books begin with what many of the writers of these texts refer to as the simplest essays, these are descriptive and narrative essays. Here the students must show that they can apply what they've learned thus far: proper sentence construction and the basic organizational patterns, a beginning, a middle and

an end for each paragraph as well as the paper as a whole. To further help the students understand this process, many of these text books provide visual graphs of some sort.

Once the students understand and are able to write these "simple" essays, they are ready to tackle the more complex ones, the expository type papers, the persuasive and argumentative essays. Writing these types of essays are very important because, as scholars like Scollon and Scollon show, these are the type of essays favored by mainstream society. Once the students have demonstrated that they can follow this particular model, they have shown that they have mastered a certain way of writing, essayist literacy, which demonstrates a certain way of thinking, of viewing, and structuring the world, a "way of life" that is culturally specific to a group of people, the main stream and educated group (Farr, 1992; Heath, 1983; Scollon and Scollon 1981). The type of discourse style I am displaying with this paper.

In conclusion, I want restate two important finding of my study because they are important when studying how we teach. First, we must look at this model of discourse, essayist literacy, when studying how one teaches writing because this pattern is used implicitly in our written work as well as intuitively in our oral discourse. Secondly, we need to take a close look at the text that we use as well because the textbooks we use in further reenforced this particular pattern. But I do want to clarify a couple of points at this time. First, I want

to make it clear that my data is only from the study of one class. And one should be careful in reading too much into this. What my study does do, is support Bizzell's concerns about why there are discrepancies in the students doing well in school. Also, it adds support to Ogbu's argument about students being resistant to learning this style of discourse, especially if we are teaching a way of life. Add to this the idea that we do a lot of teaching intuitively and unconsciously, it is reasonable to assume that there will be some students who will excel, and it will be those students whose culture is close to what we teach. It also supports Farr's idea that the farther ones culture is from the mainstream culture, the more problems those students will have when it comes to doing well in school. In addition, the differences in communicative systems by which people operate may conflict and interfere with the teaching and learning processes in the classroom. And with all these different facets coming into play, then it isn't difficult to conceive of ways in which such conflicts might interfere with learning to write. It is worth taking a closer look at how we teach. But we need to look at many more classes and at different class levels to get a better understanding of how we teach.

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